



VOLCANIC MOMENTS: FOUR PRACTICES FOR FACING SURPRISES WITH GRACE

BY LARRY DRESSLER

A volcano erupts in Iceland. Tens of thousands of flights are cancelled, and millions of passengers stranded. This is the kind of surprise I call an “oy vey moment.” *Oy vey* is a Yiddish term. I grew up hearing my grandparents use the expression frequently. It’s an exclamation of dismay, frustration, or exasperation.

Oy vey moments have three defining characteristics. They are unexpected. They are unwanted. They are uncontrollable in that we have little ability to contain or influence them directly. Organizations have their own versions of volcanic events—a product failure, the loss of a key employee, an economic recession. We often label these events as distractions, disruptions, or disasters.

In the midst of unwanted surprises, leaders and change agents often lose

their calm and clarity. We get stuck in fight-flight-freeze mode. Have you experienced any of these typical reactions in the face of an oy vey moment?

- Lost your sense of humor
- Became fixated on what wasn’t working
- Gave up completely
- Felt annoyed and resentful
- Looked for someone to blame
- Pretended it wasn’t happening

It’s natural to feel frustrated and confused by unwanted surprises. It’s just not all that useful. Being stuck in self-protection blocks our access to our creative resourcefulness and delays resolution of the problem.

It’s in oy vey moments that Peter Senge’s notion of *personal mastery* becomes particularly important. He defines personal mastery as the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively.

Here are four practical ways in which you can put personal mastery into practice in an oy vey moment:

1. **Check-in:** In the moment of breakdown, notice what you are feeling physically and emotionally. Simply notice without judgment (e.g., I am feeling angry and frustrated).

2. **Name It:** Try to name the underlying thought, judgment, or belief that you are holding onto very tightly in this moment (e.g., I need to travel to Europe this week for an important meeting).

3. **Pause:** Take some deep and conscious breaths. Refrain from taking action.

4. **Shift:** Ask yourself some questions aimed at shifting you into a more productive mental, emotional, and physical state. Some of these questions include:

- What is my real purpose and who am I here to serve?
- What beliefs can I let go of right now in order to serve my highest purpose?
- What are the hidden gift and opportunities in this moment?

How do you recognize that you are developing greater personal mastery in the way you deal with the volcanic eruptions in your organization? Where others see disruption and disaster, you will increasingly see opportunity for creativity and breakthrough. ■

Larry Dressler is the founder of Blue Wing Consulting, LLC, and author of the recently released book, *Standing in the Fire: Leading High-Heat Meetings with Clarity, Calm, and Courage* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers/ASTD, 2010).

TEAM TIP

Try the four practices listed in this article the next time your organization or group experiences a “volcanic moment.”